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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 002172

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL REFORMERS CRITICIZE GOK FOR CRACKDOWN ON ISLAMIST PARTY

REF: KUWAIT 405

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The GOK has come under criticism from prominent Kuwaitis for actions taken against members of the recently established Salafi, Islamist Nation's Party (Hezb Al-Ummah). All fifteen party founders were charged on May 2 with attempting to overthrow the government, violating laws governing public gatherings, and violating press law. As the party has openly called for the peaceful rotation of power, the charges are widely viewed as warnings from the GOK to those who would attempt to organize political parties that the ruling Sabah family will not tolerate the diminution of its authority. End Summary.

12. (U) On May 2, more than three months after a much-criticized press conference announcing the establishment of the Nation's Party (reftel), the GOK brought charges against the fifteen founding members for violating the Press and Publications Law, violating the Public Gatherings Law, and for forming a political party aimed at ultimately overthrowing the state. The charge of attempting to overthrow the state is a felony punishable by up to fifteen years in prison. (Note: The press conference was held in the diwaniya, or gathering room, of a party member. Such meetings are specifically exempted from the Public Gatherings Law. End Note.)

13. (U) The party's founders had been the focus of intense GOK scrutiny since late January, when they were initially summoned for questioning by Kuwait State Security and the Public Prosecutor's office on grounds that they had not requested a permit for their January 29 press conference. The misdemeanor charge of violating the Press and Publications Law was leveled because the group had sent a letter to Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah requesting that he enact political reforms. Upon release after the first interrogation, all were temporarily prohibited from traveling outside Kuwait. Nine members were subsequently interrogated on May 3 for a reported nine hours and were freed only after each paid KD 300 (approx. \$1700) bail.

Liberals and Islamists Unite

14. (SBU) The GOK's actions, seen by many as a power play aimed as much at stopping reform efforts as countering Islamists, have been criticized by conservatives and liberals. On May 4, a coalition of eight Liberal and Islamic political groupings issued a joint statement accusing the GOK of engaging in "oppressive action" against the party's founders. "The groups affirm their rejection of these oppressive measures and express their indignation at attempts to restrict the party's political activity, which aims at pushing forward the process of political reforms." Writing in the local Arabic daily Al-Watan on May 7, columnist Nahar Al-Mekrad called the GOK pursuit of the Nation's Party founders "unjustifiable." While taking pains to point out he does not condone the party's Islamist platform, he called on the GOK to "deal with the popular political reality through forbearance and an open mind."

15. (C) Notable liberals confirmed this point of view during meetings with Poloff. Liberal columnist Ahmed Al-Deyain noted that political parties were not illegal in Kuwait, despite their prohibition by the GOK. He said that although the State Security Law prohibits activities to overthrow the state, charges by the GOK that the Nation's Party had undertaken any such activity were "weak accusations." Deyain said the GOK had brought charges against the party's members after they had hosted seminars examining a number of current political issues. Despite his personal misgivings about the Nation's Party platform, he said the party founders were "courageous" in pushing for political reform in Kuwait. Former Information Minister Sa'ad Bin Tefleh agreed, adding that the legalization of parties and the rotation of power were "essential" elements to any real democracy.

Nation's Party Claims it is Open to All

16. (U) The Nation's Party platform calls for the

establishment of an Islamic state, political pluralism and the peaceful rotation of power. A statement issued by party spokesman Ali Al-Qatani after the GOK leveled its charges calls for political groupings to "reject these oppressive measures and to work together towards political reform." Although the party is comprised primarily of Salafi Islamists, party founders, including former Secretary General of the Salafi Movement Hakem Al-Mutairi, have claimed that membership is non-sectarian and based solely upon ideological agreement with the party platform. The party has reportedly written a draft law governing the establishment of political parties in Kuwait, and hopes to introduce in in the National Assembly with the support of conservative MPs.

17. (U) Neither Kuwait's constitution nor its electoral law ban political parties, and many de facto parties operate freely and openly, often under the monikers 'forum,' 'bloc,' 'grouping,' or 'alliance.'

18. (C) Comment: Despite their democratic rhetoric to the contrary, the Nation's Party is an ultra-conservative organization that seeks to reestablish a Muslim caliphate governed by religious law, and is decidedly anti-western. As with other such organizations, it is unclear to what extent it would adhere to its own calls for political tolerance should it ever come to power. This, most likely, is the reason that the GOK has dealt severely with the party to date. End Comment.

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